

Foreword

This report was completed by X5 Management, an Edmonton-based Consulting firm, for the November 28, 2023, Business Leaders Forum. X5 Management was hired by the City of St. Albert to provide facilitation services for the forum and an independent report summarizing the discussion and key themes. This report will be published on the City of St. Albert Business Forum webpage at stalbert.ca/forum.

Introduction

The second installment of the Business Leaders Forum was hosted by the City of St. Albert's Economic Development Department on November 28th, 2023.

The café style event was held at the St. Albert Curling Club and brought together more than 25 local business leaders and politicians who shared their best ideas about how to improve downtown vibrancy.

Shawn McCauley, the Manager of Business Retention and Expansion for the City of St. Albert, was the subject matter expert who kicked off the evening by giving insights and examples about downtown vibrancy in St. Albert, along with best practices from leading municipalities around the country.

After this brief presentation the facilitator (Gordon Sheppard from X5 Management) led a series of brainstorming opportunities that included 1x1 and group discussions in which participants had lively interactions and then shared their ideas verbally. They also recorded their suggestions on sticky notes that were then grouped together on easels, as well as writing in handouts that were provided at their tables.

Key areas that were covered included identifying the strengths, opportunities, and challenges for downtown St. Albert, as well as digging into potential outcomes, and how to make those outcomes happen.

Throughout the session Ingrid Carlton (from X5 Management) took notes and then she worked with Gordon Sheppard to assemble the ‘What We Heard’ report.

Question: What makes downtown a place where people want to go?

To start the brainstorming session the facilitator asked participants to get into pairs and answer the question ‘What makes downtown a place where people want to go?” The following is a summary of their responses.

Heart Of The City

Many people felt that downtown is the heart of St. Albert. Participants shared fond memories of activities like skating at Ducky’s Roller Rink, St. Albert festivals and bringing the kids to the candy store. This highlighted the importance of creating outstanding experiences to draw people downtown.

Suggestions included creating more night life offerings that could include attracting craft brew pubs and more venues like Gracie Jane’s and boutique bars with live music and karaoke. Other offerings could include creating more meeting areas like summer patio bars, creative outdoor dining options along the river, and unique novelty coffee shops. People also talked about growing opportunities at The Arden Theatre and the Library.

Make It Easier

People also mentioned that it would be helpful if it was easier to put on activities and events, especially from a municipal regulation perspective, as well as helping businesses figure out how to gain access to more relevant funding. Efforts like these could create more opportunities for food trucks, beer gardens, farmer’s markets and more.

Learn From Best-In-Class

Comparisons were made to downtowns in other jurisdictions including Banff Ave. in Banff, and Stephen Ave. in Calgary, because they have features like walkability and a wide variety of activities and destination shops and eateries. Sparks Street in Ottawa was referenced as an excellent example of a permanent outdoor pedestrian mall that

includes housed businesses and heritage architecture, while hosting popular events and festivals throughout the year.

Experiment With Timing

Emphasis was placed on the need to provide a diverse range of products and services during hours that align with people's availability. For instance, an establishment could start out as a pizzeria in the day and become a wine bar in the evening.

Create A Wide Variety Of Destinations

Creating a wide variety of destinations, including residences, a skating rink, and a grocery store was also talked about. New residences could also attract younger generations to live downtown. There was even a suggestion to build an arts school that could attract 250+ students who would live and study downtown.

Close Specific Streets

There was a suggestion that certain streets could be shut down frequently to accommodate events and build foot traffic.

This would also help to address the perception that downtown is currently considered more of a thoroughfare than a destination.

Question: What are the strengths, opportunities, and challenges for downtown?

Participants were asked to list the strengths, opportunities, and challenges for downtown St. Albert. The following is a summary of what they had to say.

Strengths

Engaged Stakeholders

There are many highly engaged stakeholders who want to improve downtown vibrancy. From business leaders to civil servants, politicians to engaged citizens and more, there is a strong will to make it grow.

Safe and Walkable

It was noted that downtown is a safe place to be, which makes it an easy place to walk and enjoy your time.

Environmental Aspects

Many people noted the beauty of downtown along with the close proximity to the highly valuable river and the interconnected and easy access trails.

Unique Independent Businesses

It was also stated that there are many unique, independently owned businesses, which can draw people downtown, and that those business owners are champions for improving downtown.

Historical and Cultural Influences

People talked about the wide variety of cultural facilities and amenities like the museum and public art. Historical influences were also pointed out, including the strong representation of the Métis heritage.

Farmers Market

People noted that another strength of downtown was the Farmers Market.

Opportunities

The entire group came up with a wide variety of opportunities to improve downtown vibrancy. Here is a summary of what was shared.

4 Seasons

Some of the ideas to help make downtown a 4 seasons destination included expanding winter activities like skating on the river, having a St. Albert Winterfest and adding a winter market.

It might be also possible to build a zip line over the river to attract visitors in the summer.

Create An Anchor Store/Attraction

One suggestion was to build an anchor, such as an enclosed walking mall or a unique arts attraction that would bring in businesses and people from other geographical regions.

Increase Non-Profit Presence

One use for vacant storefronts could be to fill them with non-profits, which would also bring more workers and their clients downtown.

Improve Infrastructure

There were several ideas related to infrastructure such as extending Perron Street, one-way traffic, adding three city blocks, and reducing St. Anne Street to two lanes and adding parking spots.

Building an amphitheatre in a parking lot, creating a public plaza and a year-round public market were additional options suggested to attract people to the downtown area.

Regulation Relaxation

Ways to support new businesses included relaxation of certain development regulations and creating programs to connect local business owners.

Diversify Businesses

There were some people who suggested that the types of business offerings downtown should be diversified.

More Venues and Events

Increasing the number of venues and events was also recommended.

Create A Competitive Local Economy

Using the incubator expertise that is already being developed in St. Albert, it was suggested that new start-ups could be encouraged, which could then create and sell more local products. This approach would also support healthy local competition because a cluster of similar businesses (e.g., brew pubs) would be a draw.

Support New Events and Grow Existing Events

Live music and festivals were mentioned often as ways to encourage families to spend time downtown.

Other suggestions included making better use of existing events and activities (e.g., growing the Art Walk).

Challenges

Foot Traffic And Hours

It was noted that there needs to be more foot traffic in order for downtown to be more successful. Lack of evening hours in some businesses and other amenities could be contributing to this problem.

Start-Up Costs

The cost of commercial real estate along with the costs of starting a business were also mentioned as a challenge.

Traffic

Issues with traffic flow and cars only using the streets as short cuts were also identified.

Transportation Access

It was mentioned that transit access and parking is limited.

Outcomes

Participants were invited to choose some of the best outcomes that could be created for downtown based on strengths, opportunities, and challenges. They were then asked to make a list of the actions to make it happen, along with the stakeholders who would be involved.

Two potential outcomes were explored which included:

1. How to use Arts/Music/Events to create connections to downtown

2. Making downtown a 4 seasons destination.

Outcome #1 – Using the Arts/Music/Events to Create Connections to downtown

There was a consensus that Arts, Music, and Events play a significant role in fostering connections.

Proposed actions to make this outcome happen included:

- Moving the Art Walk to outdoor patios
- Making patios more visible
- Inviting organizations to host events (e.g., Oilers signing)
- Closing the street for a Friday night street party
- Putting speakers along Perron Street.
- Continue connection to the Métis community through art, music, and cultural experiences
- Aligning business promotions with events
- Snowboarding competition
- Seeking resident participation in a beautification competition

Stakeholders

For all of these, the Business Improvement Area (BIA), the City, business owners and residents were identified as key stakeholders, all expected to make contributions in support of these initiatives.

Outcome #2 – Making Downtown a Four-Season Destination

This initiative aims to break away from seasonal limitations, ensuring that downtown remains a lively and welcoming space, offering diverse experiences and attractions for residents and visitors alike, regardless of the time of year.

Proposed actions to make this outcome happen included:

- Improve lighting in the winter
- Après-ski amenities like outdoor heaters
- Heated stage for year-round live entertainment
- More awnings over store fronts
- Multipurpose stall components which allow the community to rent for their own block parties (e.g., one for kids, one for skating, one for music)
- A boutique hotel downtown that would hold weddings and other events
- Gamify downtown using digital technology that incorporates stories and histories

Stakeholders

Once again, the BIA, the City, business owners and residents were recognized as valuable stakeholders who would all play a role.

Conclusion

One key theme that emerged is that improving downtown vibrancy is not just up to government, but it will require a collective effort from all stakeholders, including businesses and citizens. No one can do it alone, so now is the time to collaborate and ensure that the right actions are taken to make downtown St. Albert a place that everyone can be even more proud of.

The overall feedback for the event was positive and many of the business leaders expressed their interest in supporting forums like this in the future.

The business leaders also said they were grateful that key municipal leaders were participating, including Mayor Cathy Heron, Councillor Brodhead, Councillor MacKay, the City's Chief Administrative Officer, and staff from both Economic Development and Planning & Development departments for the City of St. Albert.

The next Business Leaders Forums are planned for the spring and fall of 2024.

If you would like to participate in future forums, please visit stalbert.ca/forum.